

All Messed Up, So Out of Line by evendanstevens

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Hopper thinks he's done the right thing by ignoring his feelings for Joyce.

That is of course until Joyce starts seeing someone else.

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Author's Note:

why hello there! I haven't done a mini fic in a while and I've been working on this chapter on and off for the past couple of months and finally finished it so figured I would share. if you guys like it I will be sure to continue. in the meantime, please enjoy this chapter!

title is taken from Dancing On My Own by Robyn, for the sake of this fic however I'm pulling inspo from the Kings of Leon version.

By the time Joyce finally got home, it was dark out, a sharp contrast to the bright blue sky she had reflected on before passing the 'Leaving Hawkins' sign hours earlier. Her pinto made a strangled noise of protest as she parked in the driveway. She knew she should've used another form of transport, maybe borrowed Jonathan's car that seemed to be running a lot smoother than hers these days, but she didn't want to raise any questions. But it would appear questions had been raised regardless. Because as she pulled into the driveway that she expected to be empty, Jonathan having plans with Steve and Nancy, Will at the Wheelers all weekend, she spotted the Blazer now parked next to her.

She turned off the engine but kept her hands gripped on the steering wheel, staring down at her lap. How the hell was she supposed to explain this? She thought she would wait, plan something in her head, maybe rehearse her excuse but when she looked up from the wheel, she saw it. The small orange glow coming from the porch. He was there, waiting for her. And when the light grew for a moment as he inhaled the cigarette, it illuminated his eyes long enough for Joyce to see that he was staring right at her.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out of the car, putting her bag over her shoulder. She hovered for a moment, leaning on the open car door, looking at Hopper, trying to get a read on his expression. But she could tell in the way he didn't say anything, the way he remained

completely still, how his eyes never left her, that he wasn't pleased. Oh no, it was quite the opposite.

He was angry.

For anyone else, the sight of the Chief of Police standing on their front porch, staring you down, may have been enough to make them shit their pants right there on the spot. But this wasn't anyone else. This was Joyce Byers, the woman who just seven months ago, had her possessed son try and choke the life out of her, had watched interdimensional beings tear apart her boyfriend, and ventured into literal hell. So it was going to take a lot more than Jim Hopper's disapproving scowl to scare her.

With a sigh she closed the car door and hesitantly trudged along the driveway and up the steps of the porch. She glanced at Hopper, eyes still pinned on her as he stubbed out his cigarette on the ashtray on the window sill. Correctly assuming that her house was unlocked, she had given Hopper an emergency key some time ago, she pushed the door and left it open behind her as she moved into the house.

She had barely finished hanging up her coat and bag when she jumped at the sound of the door slamming shut. She turned round to yell at him, asking him what kind of bills he was paying to allow him to slam doors in *her* house, but her mouth snapped shut when she saw the pure rage on his face. Practically seeping out of him through his flared nostrils.

"Where the hell have you been?" he seethed at her. His entire body frigid with anger.

Shrugging nonchalantly, Joyce looked away from him and walked toward her kitchen to pour herself a much needed cup of coffee. "Nowhere."

Hopper scoffed angrily as he followed her, his heavy footsteps practically shaking the house. "Nowhere?! You know, when I didn't see you at work this morning I figured you had the day off and I didn't give a damn where you were. But then Jonathan comes storming into the station and tells me you've gone on some mystery trip to god knows where!" Hopper intersected her as she moved to

the cupboard, blocking her way. "The kid was worried sick, Joyce! Since when did you stop telling your kids where you're going and decide to disappear all day!" he yelled down at her.

Joyce glared up at him defiantly. "Since when do I have to tell everyone my every plan and move, Hopper?! I'm not some kid, I'm a grown woman I'm allowed to have a life outside of my family!" she yelled right back at him as she shifted past him to move to the other side of the kitchen.

"That's *bullshit*, Joyce! You are the one who makes such a huge deal about knowing where your sons are, hell, knowing where *I* am all the time, so what gives? Did you really expect to go AWOL for the day and not have everyone instantly panic?!" Hopper accused her but she kept her back turned to him, choosing not to answer him. "So what did you do?"

Joyce turned round to face him with a questioning glance. He was now stood with his arms folded across his chest expectantly. She figured the whole newfound parenting thing had gone straight to his head as he looked her with every aspect of an angered father. "What do you mean 'what did I do?'" she scrunched her face up at him, irritated at condescending nature of his demeanour.

"What did you do? Where did you go?" he shrugged, clearly trying to remain calm but his eyes were wild as they ran over her face.

"It's none of your business," she childishly retorted, pulling a mug from the cupboard above her head and picking up the kettle to go fill it with water at the sink.

"None of my business?!" he repeated in sheer disbelief. "Joyce, I had both of your sons in a frenzy wondering where the hell their mom went. Fuck it, they even had *me* in a frenzy wondering where the hell their mom went! After everything that's happened, you just take off without telling a soul. I mean Jesus, Joyce, I was freaking out! I have a right to know and so do your sons!"

At the mention of her sons Joyce slammed the kettle down in the sink creating a large bang that echoed through the house, slightly startling Hopper. Her eyes turned to him, practically ablaze. Deep down, she

knew he had every right to be pissed off at her, she would be the same if she was in his shoes. But there was something about the way he was scolding her as if she were a child that made her blood boil.

“The less they know the better, alright?! I didn’t want them involved, and I certainly don’t want you involved! This was something I had to do *alone* and you’re just going to have to accept that!” she shouted at him before turning back to the task at hand and turning on the faucet.

Hopper was silent for a moment as he observed her. Her tiny body was tense, almost shaking with fury, her face still scrunched up as it had been when she glared at him. Running a hand over his face, he knew he had to calm himself down, his anger clearly ricocheting onto her. If he kept yelling it was only going to make things worse. But as he looked at her small, stubborn frame he was reminded of the torment he’d been through all day trying to figure out where she was.

He had wanted to remain calm when Jonathan burst through the doors of his office, completely disregarding Flo’s protest, but god did he panic. A thousand scenarios had danced around his brain of horrific things that may have happened to Joyce, how she may have been hurt, or injured or worse. So he’d gone back to Melvald’s for a second time that day and relentlessly questioned Donald who had informed him that Joyce had had the day off planned for more than three days saying she was going to be out of town for the day. While it had given Hopper slight relief to know she hadn’t just unexpectedly disappeared, he had still worried nonetheless. He was close to calling the next county’s sheriff to give him her details should she show up, when Jonathan received a call from Joyce to let him know she was on her way home. Still no explanation as to where she was calling from or where she had been.

The whole thing had been sketchy to him, and even more so now as Joyce provided lame excuses.

“Joyce, whatever it is, you can tell me,” Jim lowered his voice in a way that made Joyce’s ears perk up. He sounded helpless, somehow. She turned to look at him and saw that his face now matched his voice. Gone from his features was the blind, panicked rage and instead had been replaced with a heavy concern playing on his brow.

It was the kind of expression that made Joyce's knees feel weak, like they would buckle beneath her.

She turned away from him with a shaky sigh and squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't tell him the truth, she knew fine well how angry he would be, the assumptions he would make. But when he watched her body tremble with conflict he took a step toward her and placed a gentle hand on her arm.

"Joyce..." he whispered comfortingly. He tugged slightly, gesturing for her to turn and look up at him which she did. "It's okay, just talk to me," he placed both hands on her shoulders, his eyes bearing into hers with intense concern as he read into her saddened expression.

He's going to hate me.

"If you don't want me to tell the boys, fine, I won't," he shrugged as he attempted to bargain with her. "But please just tell me what's going on, whatever it is, I can help you."

She just about shook her head until she looked up at him with those light, blue eyes. The eyes that made her skin tingle, the eyes that made her forget for a little while about how truly fucked up her life was. She had stopped denying her attraction to Hopper some time ago, but she knew nothing could happen between them. Not after everything that had happened, their owned tortured pasts intertwining would only cause further hurt and heartache for themselves and no doubt everyone else around them. And besides, he could never be attracted to her. Not after her countless breaking points he'd witnessed over all the years he'd known her.

Regardless however, those eyes gazing down at her made her want to reveal all her darkest secrets, and she found herself internally cursing the effect he had on her. The man had too much control over her emotions for his own good. And as she took in that face, the same one she had known since she was a girl, changed and stressed by the traumas life had thrown at him, she found it harder and harder to deny him, to lie to him. Feeling it begin to tear her apart, she sighed and dipped her head in defeat.

"I went to see Lonnie."

She immediately felt the loss of Hopper's touch like a punch to the gut. When she looked up at Hopper, her chest tightened at the horror on his face. He stepped away from her as he tried to process what she had just said before arching a brow at her.

"What did you just say?" his voice was completely void of emotion, but there was a dangerous look in his eye.

She let out a heavy sigh. "Forget it, just go home, Hop-" she had started to turn away from her when he seized her arm, this time his grip far more urgent than before.

"Don't walk away from me," he growled. Joyce's eyes widened, completely appalled by his sudden demanding demeanour. She knew he wouldn't be happy after he found out, she knew he'd be angry with her. But this was still her house, this was still her body he was touching. *And not in the way she'd craved for the past few weeks.*

"Take your hand off of me," she calmly requested, her eyes flashing up at him to make him more than aware of the defensive temper she was struggling to keep at bay.

He honoured her request and slowly withdrew his hand from her arm. She noticed the small twinge of guilt flash in his eye as he did so, but after he'd put some distance between the pair of them it was back to glaring at her. She could feel the anger radiating off of him. She felt like her skin was burning under his gaze, his eyes in slits, nostrils flaring with every heavy breath that he took, jaw clenched in unison with his fists as he physically tried to keep grasp onto his control.

"Why?" was what he finally asked. Joyce took a step back from him, looking back to the ground. "Why in the hell did you go see him, Joyce?"

At the sound of her name, spoken in such a thwarted and irritated tone, Joyce immediately felt ten times smaller than she already was. She wrapped her arms around herself defensively and kept her eyes pinned to the ground. "He called last week and said that he had some things he wanted to pick up from the house," she didn't dare chance a look at him, but she could more or less sense his jaw clench. "But I

didn't want him here, I didn't want him near the boys," Not after everything that had happened. The last thing she or her children needed was Lonnie coming back into their lives in one way or another. "So I went to his place in the city with his stuff."

The heavy sigh he let out seemed to beg for her attention. Joyce looked up to see Hopper running a hand over his face. He looked at her and for the first time she saw something in his eyes that she hadn't seen since the yelling started. He looked scared. Not scared of her no, but scared *for* her. His mouth ajar, his eyebrows furrowed with worry as he gazed at her with wide, emotive eyes.

"You should never have gone there," his blunt, authoritative voice seemed completely mismatched with his expression.

Joyce's jaw clenched and she looked away from him again. She and Hopper had never really spoken about Lonnie since they'd become more involved with each other's lives. She figured Hopper had simply heard the stories, therefore he didn't want to discuss what he assumed to probably be a difficult topic for Joyce. He would've assumed correctly. She only ever talked about Lonnie when asked, and even then it wasn't a very detailed answer. It was hard enough to talk about Lonnie with anyone, let alone the guy who had actively and repeatedly told her not to go with Lonnie, had warned her against Lonnie and tried to protect her when she was a kid. But she had been too stubborn and naive to listen.

Which is why she couldn't help but feel the utter shame and anger when Hopper had first asked her about Lonnie that day in his office when Will went missing. She could see it in Hopper's face that he knew well enough that Lonnie would not be in the picture anymore, that he had turned out to be the exact same deadbeat that Hopper had expected him to be way back when. And then when he'd asked her again, in the same house they were standing in now, she felt like a defiant, stupid teenager, and her defences had engaged and she couldn't look at him anymore.

"I didn't want him around the kids," Joyce mumbled, her hands tightening on her crossed arms as she pathetically shrugged.

"That doesn't mean you go to him yourself, on your own like that,"

Hopper began to sound exasperated, and once again Joyce was not a fan of the way he spoke to her the same way she had seen him speak to Jane when she had messed up. “God, you didn’t have to be so careless, you should’ve told me, I would’ve gone with you!”

Joyce felt that anger begin to boil within her again. Jim Hopper, ever the protector, ever making her feel like she needed to *be* protected. Like she was some helpless, pathetic, weak little thing that needed someone to fight her battles for her. Like she wasn’t the woman who worked two jobs to raise two teenage boys, like she wasn’t the woman who put up with a pile of bullshit all on her own long before Hopper came back into her life. She was tired of it, tired of being seen in his eyes like someone who constantly needed help, whether she asked for it or not.

“God dammit Hop, it was my problem! It was my choi-”

“I don’t give a damn, Joyce, what if something had happened?!”

“I was completely fine, nothing happened!” she shouted back at him after he cut her off with yet another yell.

“But what if it had?!” he yelled even louder this time, startling her. In the entirety of their new found friendship over the past year and a half, he had never yelled at her like this. But as she calmed down from her initial fright, she could see in his face that fearful look and realised that he wasn’t lashing out of a place of anger. No, he seemed genuinely *worried* about the prospect of her being hurt.

“What if something happened to you, what if that bastard-” he cut himself off with a visible flinch, his eyes clenched shut, clearly unable to bare the scenario he was imagining. He turned away, pacing for a moment in a bizarre display of concern that Joyce had never seen from him before. He turned back to face her, his widened and frantic expression beginning to soften. “You should’ve told me that’s what you were doing.”

She shrugged, beginning to feel a twinge of guilt at the obvious dread and worry that had been coursing through him all day, and possibly even more now that she had told him the truth. “I didn’t think it concerned you...”

"Of course it concerns me, Joyce," he looked down at her with that same expression he had a moment ago before she'd told him she'd gone to see Lonnie. He bent down to her height and placed his hands on her shoulder, those damn blue eyes that she couldn't bare to look away from held her captive in his intense stare. "You and me, we're supposed to be a team, we're not supposed to keep things from each other," Joyce felt a pinch of anger at his statement there, but she fought hard to keep it down so that she might just endure the way he was looking at her for a little while longer. "We have to trust each other, alright?"

Try as she might, there were some angers, like the one that Joyce had kept repressed for months now, that couldn't be kept down.

"Trust each other?" she scoffed, causing a very obvious look of confusion to cross Hopper's forehead. "Like the way you trusted me so much to tell me about Jane?"

He searched her face, before pulling away from her again with a frown. "We talked about this, Joyce," he sighed. "You know why I couldn't tell you."

"And I had to accept that," she held her head high, a new found sense of determination in her anger. "So you just have to accept that I couldn't tell you about Lonnie."

This time it was Hopper that scoffed. "This is *completely* different," he shook his head, as if what she was saying was completely ridiculous. "I didn't tell you about Jane because I was trying to protect you! You didn't tell me about Lonnie becau-"

"Because you never would've let me go!" Joyce was now making the leap to yelling again, causing Hopper to immediately shut his mouth. He went to go speak again, but she promptly cut him off before he could even get a word out. "Be honest Hopper, if I had told you where I was going today, would you have me let go?"

With a reluctant breath, he answered. "No."

"Exactly," she hissed at him before running her hands through her hair. "God, why do you think you can just control *everyone* around

you?! Why is always *you* calling the shots!"

"That's not true..."

"Yes it is!" she was getting louder and she knew it. But she also didn't care. This wasn't just months of frustration that was being unleashed now, this was years. "It's been like this ever since high school!" she pointed at him accusingly.

Joyce could see the anger in his face now, the anger he was fighting to maintain. They had always been like this, it could never be just one of them being angry at the other, no. For some reason if one of them was angry at the other, they *both* had to be angry at each other. There was something about the way Joyce would feel humiliated and intimidated by Hopper's onslaught of rage that would cause Joyce to get defensive and lash out, and there was something about Joyce's shrill and accusing yells that pushed all of Hopper's buttons.

His jaw clenched as he tried to keep a lock down on the threatening outbursts. "What the fuck are you talking about?" he growled at her, this time unphasing her.

"When we were in high school you would not stop annoying me and pestering me to stay away from Lonnie and trying to act like you knew what was best for me and you-!"

"Well it's not like I was wrong, was I!"

Joyce froze. Her rage quickly dissipated and hot tears sprang to her eyes. She wasn't angry any more. She was somewhere between furious and heartbroken and it was too much. It was all too much. The silence between them palpable as the pair stared at each other. Joyce eyes wide and watering, Hopper's unrelenting frown beginning to soften as he realised what he had just said.

He took a step towards her. "Joyce I-"

"Get out."

"Joyce please," he held a hand out to her but she spun on her heel and walked away from him. "I'm sorry please can we just talk about this?"

Hopper caught up to her and found her standing by the front door that she was now holding open for him. She glanced at him to make sure that he understood what she meant, and when she saw the pleading look in his eyes she pulled her gaze away to stare at the floor instead.

“Just go, Jim, please,” her voice was small, her throat seemingly clogged with tears that she was trying to fight back. He felt his heart drop into his stomach, unable to remember the last time she’d even called him by his first name. He knew in high school that’s what she would call him if she was angry or upset with him. It would appear that that hadn’t changed.

He could have left right then. He could have listened to her walked right out the door. But then all he would’ve thought about the entire ride home was the fact that he’d hurt her. That’d he’d hurt one of the few people he actually cared about and not done a damn thing to make it right. He wouldn’t have the faintest idea on how to approach her, how to rebuild this relationship they had between them, this relationship that he cherished so dear. This relationship that he secretly craved to turn into something more.

So instead of leaving, Hopper strode over to Joyce, trying his best not to tower over her in a threatening way, and looked down at her with heartfelt and apologetic eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. But she still didn’t look at him. “Joyce...” she looked up at him then, and he tried not to crumble as a tear escaped her eye. Before another could fall, he scooped her into his arms and held her. “I’m sorry,” he had bent low so he could rest his chin on her shoulder. He could feel her body tremble with reluctant tears, her arms at her sides. She was refusing to return his embrace, but she also didn’t want to protest it.

“I’m an idiot, just a fucking idiot,” he grumbled hopelessly. Hopper thought for a split second he heard her laugh, then realised it was the sharp inhale of a shaky sob. He squeezed her tighter, sure not to hurt but enough but enough to reassure her that he was sincere and that he meant every word. “I’m so sorry, Joyce.”

He could’ve cried out in relief when he felt her short arms wrap

around his neck, reciprocating the embrace. She nestled her head into the crook of his neck and breathed deeply, calming herself. Hopper murmured his sorry's over and over again as his hand ran up and down her back. He inhaled the scent of her, the smell of laundry detergent, cigarettes, the musty store room of Melvald's, yet always faintly carrying the scent of a perfume she'd probably had for three years now. It was a scent he'd come so familiar with, something that had begun to bring him so much comfort. But this close, a close intimacy they had shared for a long time, not since about two months after Bob died, the smell was almost overwhelming. Everything about her was dizzying, her small hands fiddling where they connected behind him, the cold tip of her nose grazing the bare skin of his neck, sending unexpected tingles through his spine. Hopper's senses seemed to have gone into overdrive, as he appeared to have momentarily forgotten how to breathe.

Joyce must have felt him tense and pulled away ever so slightly so she could see his face. He was staring at the ground, somehow unable to look at all of a sudden. She herself was well aware of how close they were, and she was even more apparent as how Hopper's arms tightened on instinct after feeling her even remotely loosen their embrace. Whether he was aware of it or not, he wasn't wanting to let her go. And with a determined but nervous gulp, Joyce assured herself that she didn't want him to either.

She crouched down in his grasp, only somewhat so as to disturb his staring contest with the carpet. Her eyes caught his, and to her surprise, he followed her gaze as she returned to standing upright in his arms. Everything seemed to halt around them, the only sound to be heard was that of the shaky breaths exchanged between them. He was looking at her with such a hesitant but intense gaze, as if he was looking over her face for any indication that she didn't want this.

But she wanted this, god did she want this.

So instead of giving him any indication that she didn't want this, she gave him an indication that would show exactly what she wanted. And she did so with a subtle yet significant glance at his mouth then back to his eyes. That seemed to be the only signal he needed. In a movement so fast it almost made her head spin, Hopper gently pressed his lips to hers.

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"I kissed Hopper."

Karen Wheeler choked and Joyce swore she saw wine stream out of the woman's nose. Her perfectly manicured hand spread across her chest as she coughed, clearing her throat and regaining her breathing. Joyce gave her an apologetic look that Karen only returned with wide eyes and a mouth that could catch flies.

"*What?!*" the exclamation was choked yet still sounded like that high pitched squeal Karen had had since high school.

Joyce shrugged and looked intently at her own glass of wine, circling the rim with her slim forefinger. "Well, he kissed me or I kissed him. I don't really know," Joyce shook her head, very aware of how ridiculous she sounded.

"And when did this happen?" Karen asked as she wiped the sputtered wine from the counter with a dish towel.

"A couple weeks ago," Joyce quietly replied, squeezing her eyes shut for a second, flinching as she anticipated yet another loud outburst from Karen.

"*A couple of-!*" Karen shot up straight from her bent over position over the worktop. "And you're only just telling me this *now?!*"

Joyce looked up at her and shifted her eyes to the side. "Well y'know, I've been working, and the boys--"

"Bullshit!" Joyce almost laughed at Karen's outburst of profanity. It was a different light to Karen than she was used to. Ever since Nancy was born, Karen had been all soft tones and motherly scolding when needs be. But on this rare Saturday afternoon, where Ted was golfing, Holly was at a play date and Joyce wasn't working, Karen had invited her over for a bottle or two of wine. At first, Joyce had thought it odd, after all the pair of them hadn't hung out together just the two of them in years. But she had to say she was enjoying herself and the much needed girl time.

"When I first made out with Hank Trevors, I called you straight after

it happened!" Karen raised an accusing and expertly plucked brow at the smaller woman.

Joyce rolled her eyes. "That was *high school!*"

"And this isn't?"

Joyce frowned at Karen who only responded with a smug smirk. Joyce then retaliated by taking a long sip of her wine.

"I mean, I can't exactly say I'm surprised," Karen took an equally long sip accompanied with an obvious roll of her eyes. Her eyes seemed to return when Joyce looked at her quizzically. "Don't be coy Joyce, you guys are together all of the time, and when you are, you're either playing Mommies and Daddies around the kids or making eyes at each other when you think no one is looking. Christ, Holly always says you two are married and at this point I've stopped correcting her."

Joyce took in Karen's words and felt her shoulders slump. "I guess I wasn't the only one who was wrong then."

Karen furrowed her brows in confusion as she thought for a moment before coming to realise what Joyce meant, her eyes wide with curiosity. "Wait, what happened?!"

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She wasn't sure how long they'd been like this, but as Joyce revelled in the sensation of Hopper's increasingly passionate kisses, his hands roaming repeatedly from her throat, down her sides then back up again, her hands in his hair, her back pressed firmly against the wall as she pressed her front into his chest, blissfully locked in underneath him, she realised it was nowhere near long enough. She moaned happily against his mouth as she pulled him even closer, unsure if she'd ever be able to get enough of this.

It was then that his lips stilled, his body tensed again and he sharply

pulled his mouth away from hers. With wide frightened eyes, she searched his face. She felt her stomach drop when she saw Hopper looking back at her with utter shock, and what looked to be, almost like fear?

“Did- did I do something wrong?” Joyce shakily asked as she reluctantly pulled away her hands from behind his neck.

He gaped at her, the tension between them somehow thicker than before as Joyce anxiously awaited his next words. His eyes frantically scanned her features, she noticed how his gaze seemed to linger on her cheek before he turned away, as if he were ashamed. “You, you didn’t I--” he trailed off as he let go of her and stepped away, putting a considerable distance between them.

Concerned as to what had caught Hopper’s attention, Joyce lifted a hand to her cheek. With a slight brush of her fingers, she felt a small damp line and realised she had been crying. Looking between the wet mark of her tears that now resided on her finger tips to Hopper’s downright horrified face, she shook her head.

“Hopper, I-”

“No, I shouldn’t have done that,” Hopper grumbled quickly, his eyes glued to the floor, as if he were unable to look at her. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry, Hop, I do-” she stepped toward him, but she was instead met with Hopper taking a further step away from her. The sight itself was like a punch to the gut.

He visibly gulped, and finally he brought his head up to meet her hurt filled, shocked eyes. Joyce was sure for a moment that she saw his hand twitch toward her, but it quickly stilled and he was back to looking more uneasy than she’d ever seen him. “I need to go,” he nodded, more to himself than to the woman in front of him.

Before she knew it, he had mumbled almost inaudible apologies, and a few other rushed words that she couldn’t make out and had vanished out of the door and into the dark, not looking back once.

“Jesus, Joyce, I’m so sorry,” Karen reached across the counter and placed her hand over Joyce’s. Joyce almost flinched at her touch, but instead found it to be comforting in a way she didn’t expect. What had happened between Joyce and Jim had weighed heavily on her shoulders, and she still hadn’t seen Jim since, and therefore no one to even talk to about it. And when Karen had called she hadn’t expected to tell her everything, actually anything at all for that matter. But without Hopper to talk to, she had found it all too easy to tell Karen.

“S’okay,” Joyce shrugged it off, as she had done every time Jane had turned up alone to the house over the last two weeks. She didn’t catch Karen’s sympathetic expression, instead she was more intrigued with her finger that was currently circling the bottom of her wine glass. She also didn’t catch the flash of mischief in Karen’s eyes, or the twitch of the corner of her mouth as an idea came to her head.

“Hey so I know this is probably the worst time,” Karen ducked lower so that she was eye level with Joyce. The peculiar shift in tone of Karen’s voice was enough to peak Joyce’s curiosity as she looked up at her through long lashes, very much aware of the woman’s touch on her hand. Joyce frowned in confusion and gave Karen a wary look. “But there is the guy-”

“Oh god not this again please!” Joyce pulled her hand away and instead used it to cradle her forehead as she placed her head on the counter, already exhausted with this conversation. “I’d much rather talk about me embarrassing the shit out of myself,” Joyce groaned dramatically, though her protest was simply muffled in Karen’s ears. That or Karen simply chose to ignore it. Joyce figured it was almost definitely the latter.

“This isn’t some random like last time, he’s a total catch!” Karen insisted excitedly. The enthusiasm in her voice made Joyce raise her head ever so slightly to meet her eyes.

Her interest piqued, Joyce dared to ask. "If he isn't a random, how do you know him?"

Karen bit her lip and looked away briefly. "He works with Ted."

With another groan, Joyce buried her head back in her hands.

"Oh don't be like that!" Karen hissed. "He's from the city, but he's just bought this beautiful vacation cabin near town, and he's rich and he's handsome and he's charming and-"

Joyce lifted her head fully so Karen got a clear view of her eye roll and reached for her glass of wine to take a sip. Giving up with a tired scoff Karen leaned forward again, elbows on the counter. "Look, I was going to wait till you had a couple more glasses of wine, but after what you've just said I think you could really use this."

This time it was Joyce's turn to scoff. "Everything I just told you is exactly why I *don't* need this right now."

"I'm not saying you need to marry the guy it's just one date!"

"Woah, hold on who said anything about a date?!" Joyce gaped wide eyed at Karen who became very quiet all of a sudden, refusing to meet Joyce's gaze and drinking her wine in an all too guilty manner. "Karen," Joyce raised a brow at her accompanied with a tone of warning. "What did you do?"

Karen gulped and set down her glass again. "I may have already shown him a picture of you..." Karen flinched when Joyce yelled her name to scold her but continued nonetheless. "And he said you were very beautiful!" Karen harshly defended, looking down at the smaller woman who's cheeks were growing redder by the minute.

"You can't just go around showing my picture to every bozo you mee-" Joyce stopped her yelling for a moment and thought. "Which picture?"

Karen smirked at her question. "The one of you in the green dress at Ted and I's anniversary party," she smiled smugly at Joyce.

Joyce was indeed surprised at this. Not that she thought she didn't

look good that evening, even she had to admit she had looked exceptionally more pleasant than she usually did. She was more surprised that Karen had shown him a picture of her from mere months ago, rather than a picture of her from years before where she looked arguably better than she did now. Nevertheless, Joyce refused. She did need to date anyone right now, and even if she did the one person she actually would consider dating was out of the picture. And she didn't want to use some guy as a rebound, she was better than that. She wasn't one for trying to forget her problems with a good screw. Unlike someone else she knew...

"It's just one date!" Karen kept insisting over and over again. "And besides, even if you don't want to see him again you could always throw him a fuck and get all that Hopper frustration out."

No, Joyce was better than that. But every time she tried to give an excuse, Hopper would flash in her mind. And every time he did so, her chest and her head hurt. She didn't want to hurt anymore, she didn't want to be the sad spinster who sat around moping over a man who didn't want her. Joyce was better than that too. So if there was this supposed rich, handsome, charming man out there who was interested in her, surely there was nothing wrong with just one date? She could practically hear Hopper in her head giving her shit about it, nagging her that she "*wasn't ready to date*" and "*this is a bad idea*". But then she remembered Hopper hadn't actually spoken to her in weeks, so she figured if she couldn't *physically* screw him, she'd have to do it some other way.

Karen had been right in the end. It took Joyce two more glasses of wine before she agreed to the date.